A vibrant, watercolor-style illustration of a young girl with long brown hair swimming in a large, circular pool of water. The water has concentric ripples emanating from the center. She is wearing a light-colored swimsuit. In the background, there are several large, gnarled trees with lush green foliage. The sky above the trees is a clear blue.

Tim and the Hidden People

The Pool by the Whispering Trees

Sheila K. McCullagh

Illustrated by Pat Cook

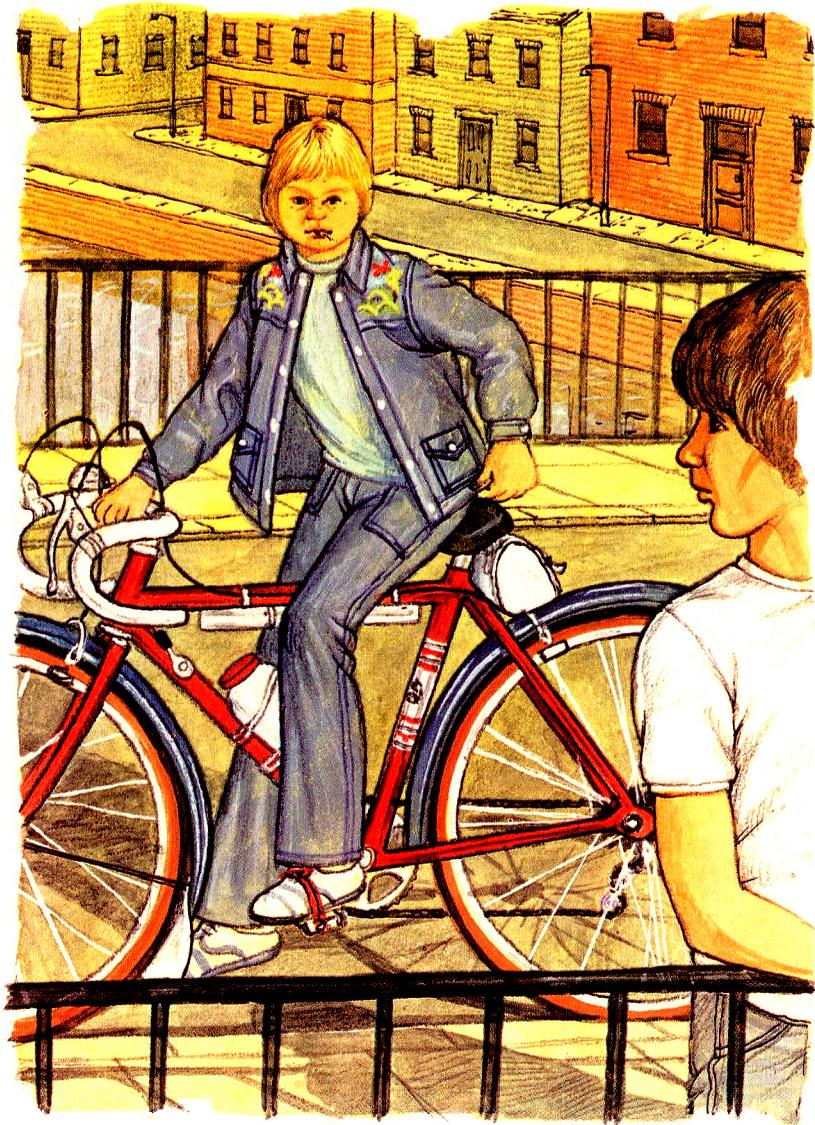
The Pool by the Whispering Trees



Sheila K. McCullagh

Illustrated by Pat Cook

E. J. ARNOLD & SON LIMITED LEEDS



It was the summer holidays, and Tim had nothing to do. He was standing on the bridge over the canal, tossing stones into the water. He was feeling hot, and bored, and lonely. His friend Arun was away, and he had no one to talk to. He had no way of knowing that this was going to be the most exciting summer he had ever had.

He heard a bell ring behind him, and turned to see a boy on a bicycle, riding over the bridge. It was Kevin. Kevin and Tim went to the same school, but Tim didn't like Kevin very much. Kevin always had plenty of money, and he made sure that everyone else knew it.

When he saw Tim, Kevin stopped, with one foot on the ground.

"Hallo," he said. "Doing anything?"

"Nothing much," said Tim.

"I'm going swimming. Like to come?" asked Kevin.
"I've found a new place."

"I haven't got a bike," said Tim.

"You can ride my old one," said Kevin. "I got this one last week. The old one isn't as good as this, but it's better than anyone else's bike."

Tim said nothing. It was hot and dusty, and he wanted to go with Kevin, but he didn't think he could.

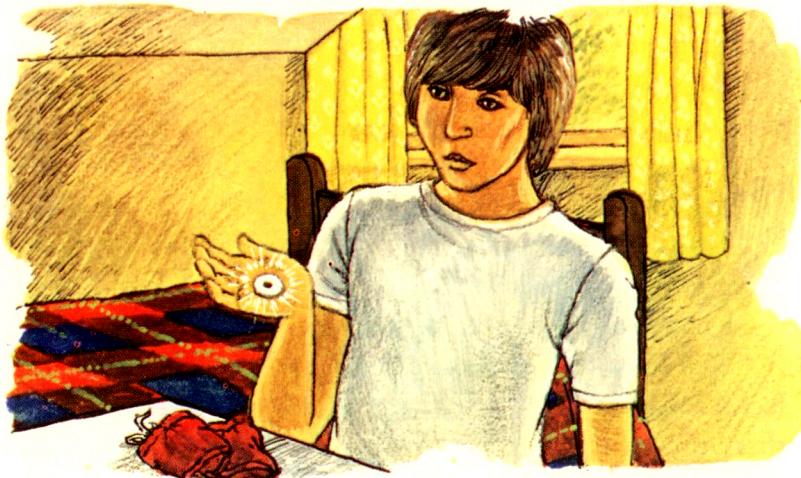
"You don't need any money," said Kevin. "It's a pool, out in the country."

Tim flushed. Kevin had guessed right. He hadn't any money, and he couldn't ask Aunt May for money to go swimming.

"All right," he said. "I'll get my things, and meet you here in ten minutes."

He turned, and ran back to The Yard.

Tim ran upstairs to his room, and pulled open the top drawer in the chest. As he pulled out his swimming things, a silver coin fell on to the floor. It was a very old coin, with a hole in the middle of it.



Tim bent down and picked it up. It was the coin Melinda had given him a year ago. Melinda was a 'safe' witch—if any witch could be called 'safe'. She was a strange woman, and the coin was a strange coin.

Tim stood there, looking at the coin in his hand. It felt very cold, and it was shining very brightly.

He remembered the night of the full moon. That was the night when the wild witches had fallen into the pool by the wood. The witches had turned into whispering trees.

Melinda had given him three coins, to keep him safe. He had had to use two of them, but he hadn't used this one. He had kept it in his pocket for a time, but it had looked so dull and black, that he had put it away in a drawer, and forgotten about it.

It didn't look black now. It was shining as brightly as a full moon.

Tim slipped the coin into his pocket, picked up a towel and his swimming things, and ran off again downstairs.

Kevin was waiting for him on the bridge, with the two bicycles. They set off along the road by the canal.

"Where are we going?" asked Tim.

"You'll see," said Kevin. "I've found a new place."

Tim didn't have time to ask any more. There was such a lot of traffic, and Tim had a hard time keeping up with Kevin. Tim didn't often have the chance to ride a bicycle, but Kevin rode one all the time, and now he was showing off his new one. He slipped in and out among the cars, riding as fast as he could.

Tim did his best to keep up with him, but it wasn't easy. He was glad when the traffic lights were against them, and they had to stop for a minute. But as soon as the lights turned green, Kevin shot ahead again.



Kevin was still some way ahead, when at last they left the town behind them. They were going out along the road that ran past Mr. Penny's house. It was also the road that led to the house of Melinda, the safe witch, and the wood where Tim had seen the wild witches, a year ago.

Tim stood on the pedals, trying to keep up with Kevin. It was all he could do to keep him in sight.

They went past the house where Mr. Penny's son lived. Tim looked across the fields to his left. On the far side of the canal, he saw Hollow Hill.

"I wonder how far Kevin's going?" thought Tim.
"We shall pass the path to Melinda's cottage, if we go
much farther."

He rode on as fast as he could.

Tim wasn't sure if he would be able to see Melinda's cottage. Last time he had seen it, he had had the magic key with him. He knew that he had only been able to see the Hidden People while he had the magic key. But when he came to the path, and looked down it, he saw Melinda's cottage standing near the little bridge over the canal.



The road ran up a little hill, past the wood where Tim had seen the wild witches.

Kevin looked behind him as he rode up the hill, and when he got to the top, he stopped and waited.

“Can’t you ride any faster than that?” said Kevin, as Tim came up.

“I don’t often ride a bike,” said Tim.

“You can have that bike for ten pounds. I don’t want it,” said Kevin.

“No thanks,” said Tim shortly. “How much farther is it?”

“We’re nearly there,” said Kevin. “It’s on the other side of the wood.”

“It—it isn’t the pool with the whispering trees, is it?” asked Tim in dismay.

“I don’t know what it’s called, but that’s not a bad name for it,” said Kevin. “There *are* a lot of trees all around it. There was a wind blowing when I found it, and the leaves do make a whispering noise.”

“We can’t swim there,” said Tim.

“Why ever not?” asked Kevin. “It’s the best place for miles! Don’t be silly. Come on.”

Without waiting for an answer, he pushed off, and rode on past the wood.

Tim followed him slowly.

Kevin came to a gate. He got off, opened the gate, and pushed his bicycle through it.

He dropped the bicycle into the long grass on the other side, and ran off down the field towards the pool.

Tim followed him through the gate, and stopped.

The green field sloped down in front of him towards the canal. In the middle of the field was a pool – an old stone quarry, filled with water by a little stream.

The sunlight was pouring down over the wood and the green field, but Tim didn't see the sunshine. He was thinking about the witches. It was just a year ago that he had come to this field at night, when the witches were dancing in the wood. He had laid the magic silver string on the ground all around the wood, and pulled the witches into the pool. He remembered the stump people, too, who lived inside tree stumps, and looked out with big green eyes. He remembered the highwayman, and wondered what had happened to his horse. Tim had pulled the silver string through a hole in the magic key, and they had all fallen into the pool below him, except the horse. The horse had galloped away, and the whispering trees had grown out of the ground while he watched.

“Come on, Tim! What are you waiting for?” shouted Kevin. He was down by the pool, standing on the bank ready to go in.

Tim walked slowly down the grass.

“Let's swim in the canal,” he said. “This pool is too dangerous.”

“Don’t be silly!” said Kevin. “It’s deep, but you can swim, can’t you?”

“Yes, but I’m not going to swim here,” said Tim.

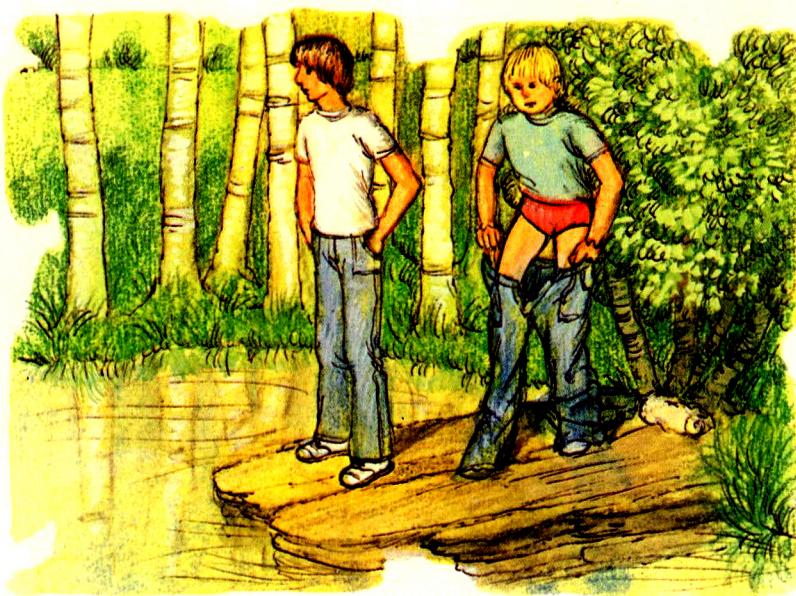
“Stay on the bank, then, if you’re afraid. You can stay at home next time,” said Kevin.

He dived into the pool.



Tim sat down on the rock by the hawthorn tree, and waited. The trees were whispering together, and a dark shadow crossed the pool. It was only a cloud, but Tim shivered.

A wind blew through the trees.



Kevin swam over, and pulled himself out on the rock.
“Aren’t you going in at all?” he asked.

Tim shook his head. “Not here,” he said. “I’ll swim in the canal.”

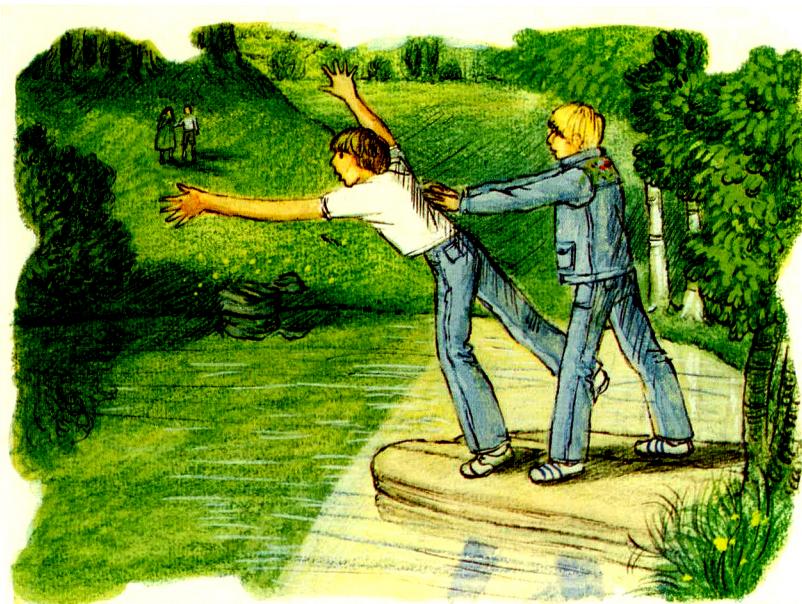
“The canal’s too dirty,” said Kevin. “I shan’t ask *you* to come again. First of all you can’t ride a bike, and now you won’t swim! Why did you come?”

He got up, and began to dry himself.

“It’s the pool,” said Tim. “I’ll swim anywhere else, but not here.”

Kevin pulled on his clothes.

Tim stood up. The trees were still whispering together in the wind.



There was a long whistle from the wood. Tim looked across the field, and saw two children standing on the edge of the wood, watching them. One was a girl, with long black hair, and the other was a boy.

“Look!” he said to Kevin.

“Look at what?” asked Kevin. “I don’t see anything.”

The wind blew through the trees again.

Tim was standing on the edge of the pool, watching the children. Kevin was behind him.

Kevin suddenly gave him a quick push, and Tim fell over the edge of the rock, and into the pool. He went right under the water, and came up gasping. It was a warm day, but the water felt as cold as ice.



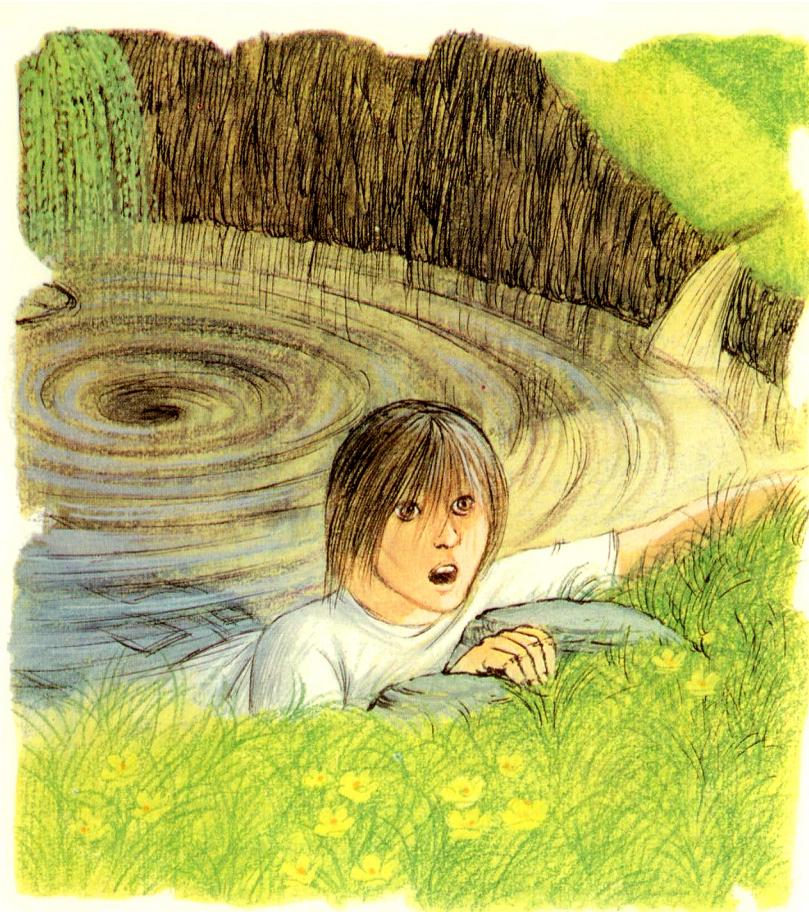
"I said I'd take you swimming, and I have!" shouted Kevin. "You can find your own way home. I'm taking both my bikes with me!"

He ran off up the field, towards the road.

Tim took a deep breath, and struck out for the bank. He felt as if ice-cold hands were pulling him down. He was fighting to keep his head above water, and the bank seemed a long way away.

A strong wind blew over the pool. The trees seemed to be shouting to each other now. He heard a rushing sound, and he felt the water beginning to sweep round into a ring.

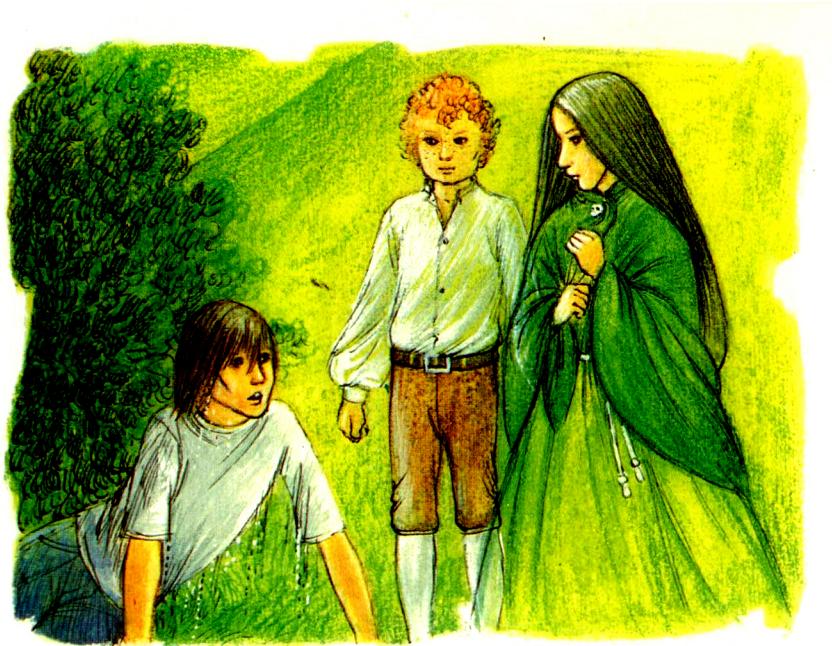
He remembered the pool a year ago. There had been a whirlpool in it then. The whirlpool was beginning to form again. He had to get out.



Tim struck out as hard as he could. He was fighting his way through the water. His hands gripped a rock on the bank, and he tried to pull himself out, but his legs were swept away behind him, and he slipped back into the pool.



Then, suddenly, a long, thick stick was pushed out towards him from the bank. Tim gripped it, and looked up. The two strange children were holding the other end. They pulled on the stick as if it were a rope.



Tim felt himself pulled towards the bank. He felt for a foothold on the rock, gripped the stick, and pulled himself out of the water, and on to the grass. He lay there for a minute, panting.

“Thanks,” he said, looking up.

The children stood looking down at him.

The taller one was a girl, with long black hair, and dark eyes. She had a strange, pointed face. She was dressed in pale green. She had a dark green shawl over her shoulders, fastened by a silver pin, and a light silver cord round her waist. The boy was dressed in brown. He had red hair, and freckles.

The two children stared at Tim for a moment, and then, without saying anything, they turned, and ran off up the field and back into the wood.

Tim looked at the pool. There was no whirlpool now. The water lay flat in the sunshine. The stream fell into one side of the pool over the little rock cliff, and ran out at the other side, as it had always done.

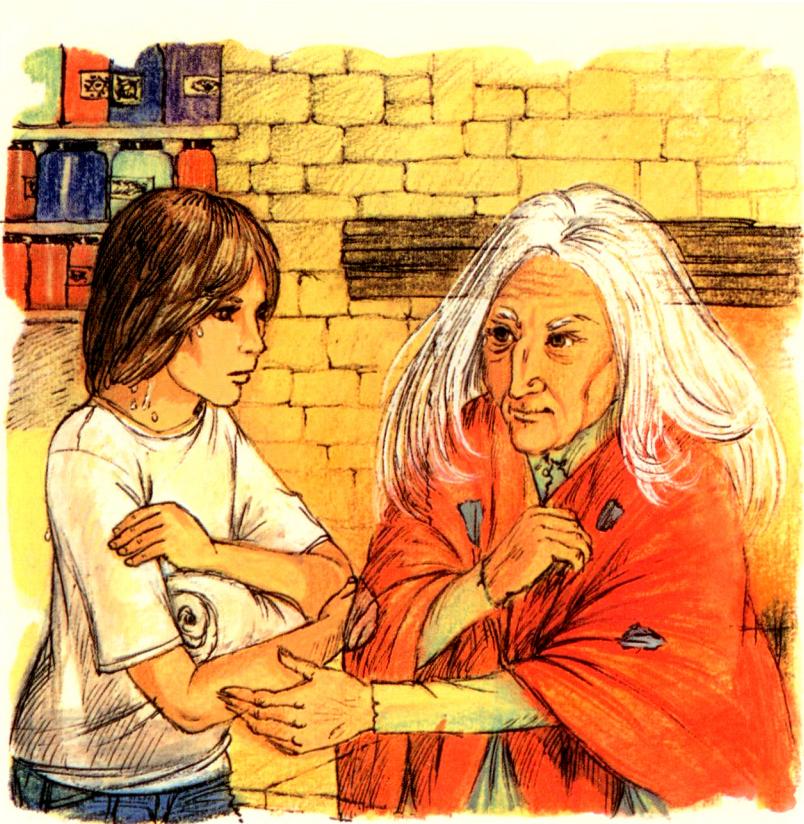
A cloud drifted across the sun, and the cloud shadow moved over the pool. A little wind blew, and the trees began whispering together again.

Tim emptied the water out of his shoes, and gave himself a rub down with his towel. His knees were shaking, and he suddenly felt very cold.

"I'll go and see Melinda now, before I go home," he said to himself. "She'll have a fire."

He walked slowly up the field. Kevin had taken both bicycles. Tim wasn't surprised. He had often seen Kevin riding one bicycle and pulling another along beside him. He climbed the gate, and set off, back along the road past the wood.

At the foot of the hill, he turned off to Melinda's cottage. He pushed open the gate, and walked up to the door. The door-knocker stared at him, as it had always done. The face on the knocker always looked so angry, that Tim never touched it. He picked up a stone, and knocked three times on the door.



The door opened at once, and Melinda stood in the doorway. She stood quite still for a moment, looking at his wet hair and his dripping clothes.

Then she smiled. "Come in, Tim," she said. "Come in by the fire."

The sunlight was streaming in through the windows, but Tim was still feeling cold. He was glad to stand by the fire.

Melinda didn't ask any questions. She went into a little room at the back of the cottage, and came back with a mug in her hand.

"Drink this," she said. "You'll need it, if you've been in the pool by the whispering trees."

"Thanks," said Tim. His clothes were beginning to steam, but he still felt very cold.

The drink was a hot one. Tim didn't know what was in it, but it seemed to run through him like fire.

"I didn't mean to go in the pool. I fell in," he said, as he handed the empty mug back to Melinda.

"Or someone pushed you in," said Melinda. She put down the mug, and sat down by the fire. "How did you get out?"

"Two strange children ran down from the wood with a long stick," said Tim. "They pulled me out. I'd never have got out without them. Are they Hidden People? I don't think Kevin could see them."

Melinda nodded. "Yes," she said. "Their names are Nicola and Jeremy. They came to me last night. Their father and mother have disappeared. The children came home, and found them gone. I'm afraid the wind witches may have turned them into stone. The children saw the witches, riding the wind, but they hid, and the witches didn't see them. Now the children are trying to make their way to their grandfather. He lives on an island in the north. You could see them because you still had the silver coin."

Melinda looked into the fire. "The children aren't safe here," she said. "The wind witches are after them."

"Who are the wind witches?" asked Tim. "And why are they after the children?"

"The wild witches ride on broomsticks. The wind witches ride on the wind," said Melinda. "If they catch the children, they will turn Nicola into a wind witch, like themselves. What they will do with the boy, I don't know. But the wind witches mustn't catch the children. The wind witches live in the south. I've done everything I could to stop the south wind blowing, but it's beginning to blow again now."

Melinda turned, and looked at Tim.

"Take the children north for me, Tim," she said. "They are not safe here, not even for one night. They can't go alone. They will never get to their grandfather, if they set out alone. But if you go with them, I think they might."

Tim stared at her.

"But – but I can't," he said. "I don't know the way."

"I can tell you the way," said Melinda.



"But—but I can't look after them," said Tim. "What can *I* do, if the wind witches find them? They'll be much safer with you."

Melinda shook her head.

"If the children stay here, the wind witches will soon find them," she said. "Then the witches will wait in the wood—or their friends, the stump people, will wait for them. Nicola and Jeremy would never stay in the cottage all the time. One day, they would go out—and the wind witches would be waiting for them."

"I thought all the stump people went into the pool with the wild witches, a year ago," said Tim.

"So some of them did," said Melinda. "But there are plenty more. Take the children back with you tonight, Tim, while there is still time for them to get away from here. The south wind is blowing, and it won't be long before the wind witches find out where the children are."

Tim looked into the fire.

"I can't go," he said. "I can't just walk out on Aunt May. I can't just go off, with two strange children. Aunt May would never understand. She wouldn't even be able to see the children herself."

"Didn't you say the children pulled you out of the pool just now?" asked Melinda.

Tim nodded. He was feeling very unhappy.

"You would never have got out of that pool, without the children's help," said Melinda.

Tim said nothing. He was thinking of Aunt May.

Aunt May would be very upset if he tried to tell her about the children. She would be sure that he was ill. She'd send for the doctor.

"Take them back with you for tonight, Tim," said Melinda. "I'll try to find someone else to go to the north with them. But take them just for a day or two, until I can find someone else to go with them. You fought the wild witches and the stump people last time, Tim. The children will be safer with you. They're not safe here, not even for one more night."



The door opened, and the two children came into the room. They stopped and stood still, staring at Tim.

Tim looked at them. They were both younger than he was. Nicola's long, black hair hung down her back like a cloak, and her big, dark eyes looked at Tim out of her strange, pointed face. Jeremy was much browner, as if he was out of doors in the sunshine most of the time.

“Well, Tim?” asked Melinda.

“All right,” said Tim. “They can come back with me for a day or two, if you like. I’ll try and see that they’re safe. They can stay up in the attics.”

“Good,” said Melinda. “When I’ve found someone else, I’ll send Knocker to you.”

She took some cakes and apples out of a cupboard, and put them in a bag. She handed the bag to Tim.

“You’ll need these,” she said. “You must go now. You must get home before dark. Go up to the main road, Tim. You’ll find a man on the road, with a car. The car has broken down. Ask him to give you a ride back. I think he will. He lives near here, and he likes children.”

“But you said his car had broken down,” said Tim.

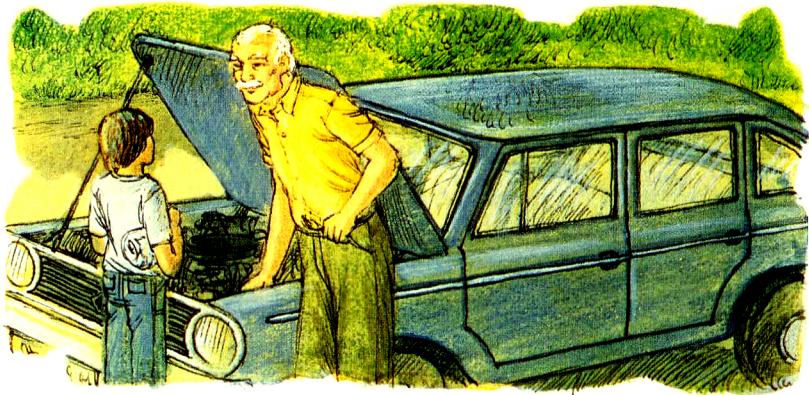
Melinda smiled. “The car will start, when *you* get into it,” she said. “But remember: he won’t be able to see Nicola and Jeremy. You’ll have to get them into the car with you.”

She turned to the children. “No tricks, Jeremy!” she said. “You do as Tim tells you. You too, Nicola. No tricks!”

The children ran to Melinda and hugged her.

That seemed very strange to Tim. He was always a little afraid of Melinda. But she looked kinder today than he had ever seen her look, and she smiled down at the children.

She came to the door with them, and watched them set off along the path.



The children hadn't said a word to Tim, and he couldn't think of anything to say to them.

As soon as they came to the main road, they saw the car. It was at the side of the road, and a man was looking at the engine. He was a tall, thin, kindly-looking man, with white hair, and Tim felt a little better.

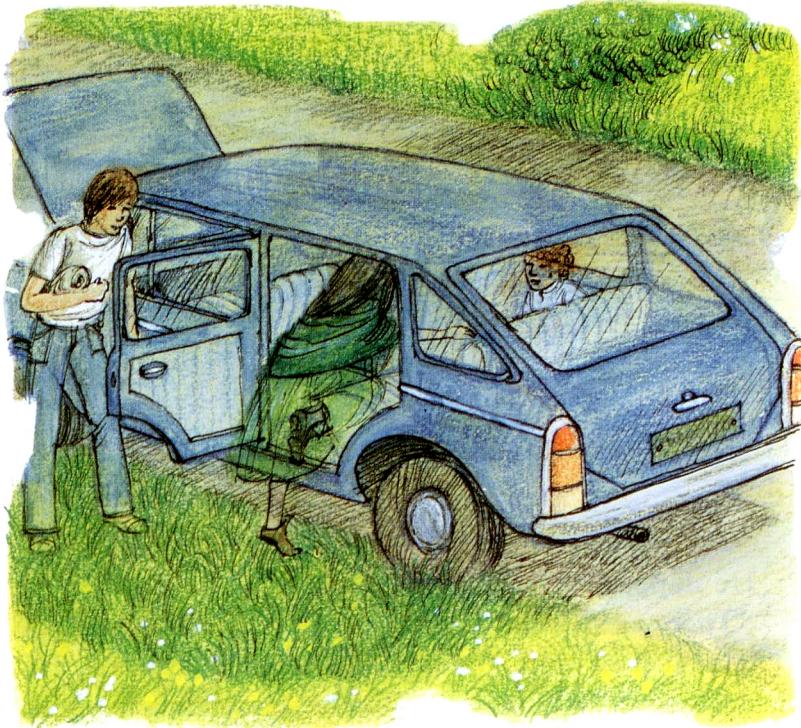
"I'll ask him for a ride," he whispered to Nicola, "and if he says 'yes', you slip into the back of the car, when he's not looking."

Tim went to the front of the car. He waited there, until the man stepped back and saw him.

"Hello," said the man.

"Can—can I come with you to the town?" asked Tim.
"There isn't a bus for hours."

"You can come if the car will take us," said the man.
"I don't know what's wrong with it. Hop in, and I'll try the self-starter again. No—not the back. Hop in beside me."



Tim had opened the back door of the car. Nicola and Jeremy slid quickly inside. Tim slammed the back door, and got in at the front, beside the man.

The man turned the key. The engine sprang to life.

"Well, look at that!" said the man. "We'll see if it'll take us into town. I don't know what was wrong with it, but it seems all right now."

Tim thought he knew what had been wrong with the car, but he said nothing.



They set off along the road.

“Been swimming?” asked the man, looking at Tim’s towel. “It’s a hot day. I’d like to have been swimming myself.”

He slapped the back of his neck.

“There are a lot of flies about, too,” he said.

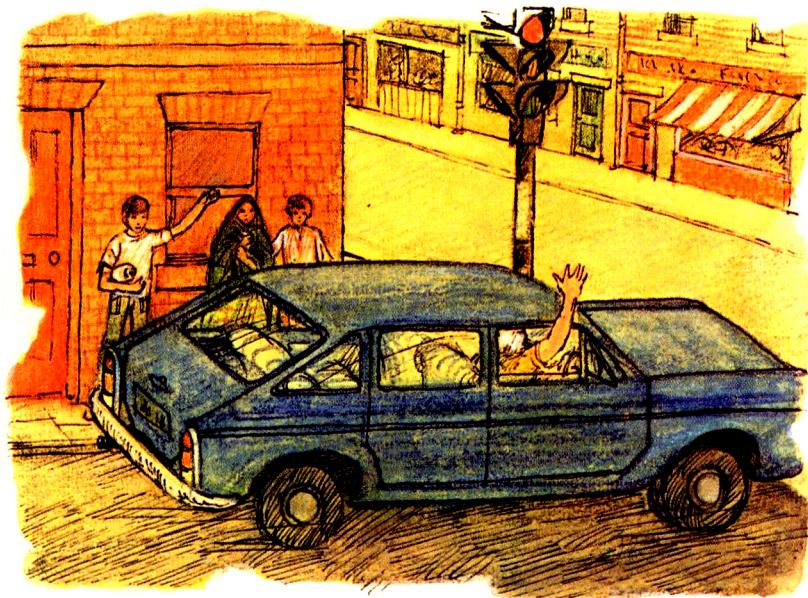
Tim looked back. Jeremy was leaning forward. He had a long straw in his hand, and he was tickling the back of the man’s neck. Tim shook his head at him. Jeremy laughed.

“I wish we could get rid of these flies,” said the man, slapping the back of his neck again.

Tim grabbed at the straw, but Jeremy jerked it away, still laughing.

“You’ll never catch them,” said the man. “We must be going to have a thunderstorm, with so many flies about.”

Nicola grabbed Jeremy’s hand, and pulled the straw away from him.



Tim was thankful when they came to the traffic lights near The Yard.

"This is where I get out," he said. "Thanks very much for the ride."

The man pulled over to the side, and stopped.

Tim managed to drop the bag with the cakes and apples over the back of the front seat as he got out, so that he had to open the back door of the car to get it. Nicola and Jeremy slid out, as soon as the door was open.

"Thanks very much," Tim said again, shutting the door.

"Any time," said the man. He waved his hand, and drove off.



"This way," said Tim. "I live down here, in The Yard. My room is at the top of the house. When I open the front door, you two keep with me, and we'll go up to the attics. You'll be safe up there. But stick close to me."

"We will," said Nicola.

"I'm hungry," said Jeremy.

"I'll get you something to eat when we get in," said Tim. "We'll have some cakes and apples."

They turned into The Yard.

Tim could see Aunt May in the kitchen, as he ran up the steps to the front door.

"Is that you, Tim?" she called, as he opened it, and the children slipped in behind him.

"Yes," Tim called back. "I'll be there in a minute."

Miss Miff came out of the door of her room. Miss Miff was the lodger who lived on the ground floor.

"So you've been swimming," she said, as she saw Tim. "There's your poor Aunt, working hard all day, and all you can do is to go swimming! Why don't you do something to help her?"

"I did try and get a job helping Mr. Penny," said Tim.
"You didn't try very hard," said Miss Miff. "I know you. You'd rather play."

Nicola slipped round behind Miss Miff, and pulled Miss Miff's hair hard.

"Oh!" cried Miss Miff, clapping her hand to her head.
Tim slipped past her. "Nicola!" he whispered. "This way. Quick!"

Jeremy slipped along after Tim, and Nicola followed, but she gave Miss Miff's hair another tug as she went by.

"Oh!" cried Miss Miff. "You wicked boy! Just you wait till I tell your aunt about this!"

She trotted off down the stairs to the basement kitchen.



Tim was thankful when he had the children safely in his room.

"You *mustn't* do that, Nicola," he said. "We haven't much money, and Aunt May needs her rent. If you're going to stay here, you'll have to leave Miss Miff alone."

"But she *wasn't* fair," said Nicola.

"I know," said Tim. "But I have to put up with her."

"Tim!" Aunt May called up the stairs. "Tim! Come down here."

"Now see what you've done," said Tim. "She thinks it was me. You stay here."

He ran downstairs.

Aunt May was standing in the hall.

"Tim," she said. "What have you been doing? Miss Miff says you pulled her hair."

"I didn't," said Tim. "She thinks I did, but I didn't. You know what she's like."

"Yes, I know," said Aunt May. "But you just remember, Tim. You've got to be polite to Miss Miff. Keep out of her way. You know she doesn't like boys."

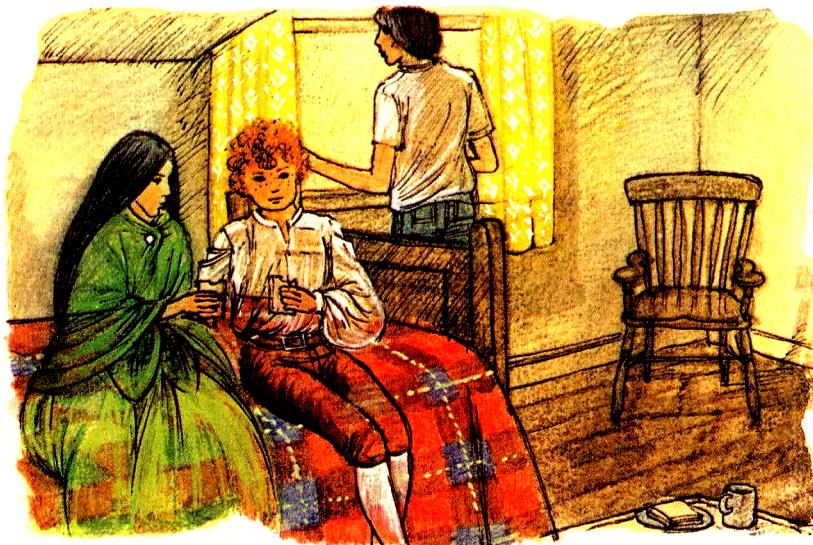
"I do try to," said Tim. "But she's always on at me."

"I know she is," said Aunt May. "But you keep away from her."

"I will if I can," said Tim.

"You can if you try," said Aunt May. "You'd better come and get your tea, and take it up to your room. You stay up there. Miss Miff is as mad as a cat that's been stung by a wasp."

Tim laughed. He ran down to the kitchen. Aunt May put his tea on a tray. He helped himself to some more slices of bread and jam, and took the tray upstairs. Melinda had asked him to look after the children 'just for a day or two', but already Tim could see that it wasn't going to be very easy.



Nicola and Jeremy shared the tea with Tim, and saved Melinda's cakes and apples for breakfast.

It was beginning to get dark outside.

Tim looked out of the window, and down into The Yard. He saw Mr. Berryman at the door of his house, calling to Sebastian, the little grey and white cat Tim had saved from Miss Miff. But there was no one else in The Yard. Everything looked as it always did.

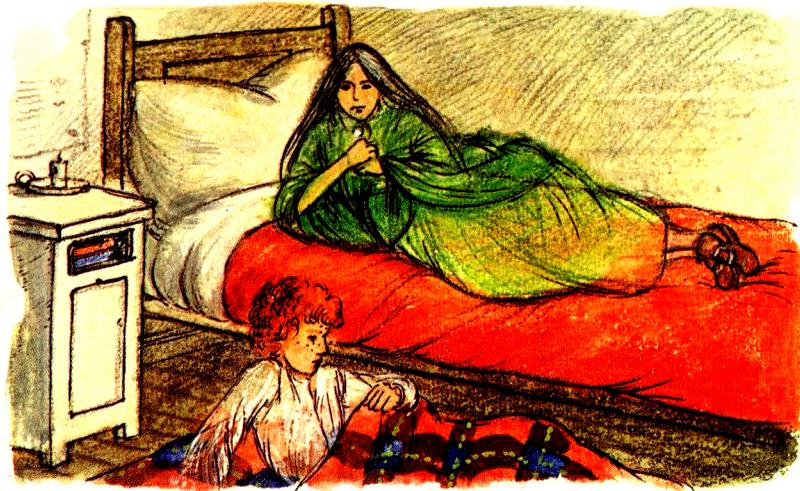
Tim pulled two blankets off his bed, and gave one to Jeremy.

"You can have the bed," he said to Nicola. "We'll sleep on the floor."

He took a last look at The Yard, and pulled the curtains across the window. Then he set the wooden bar across the door.

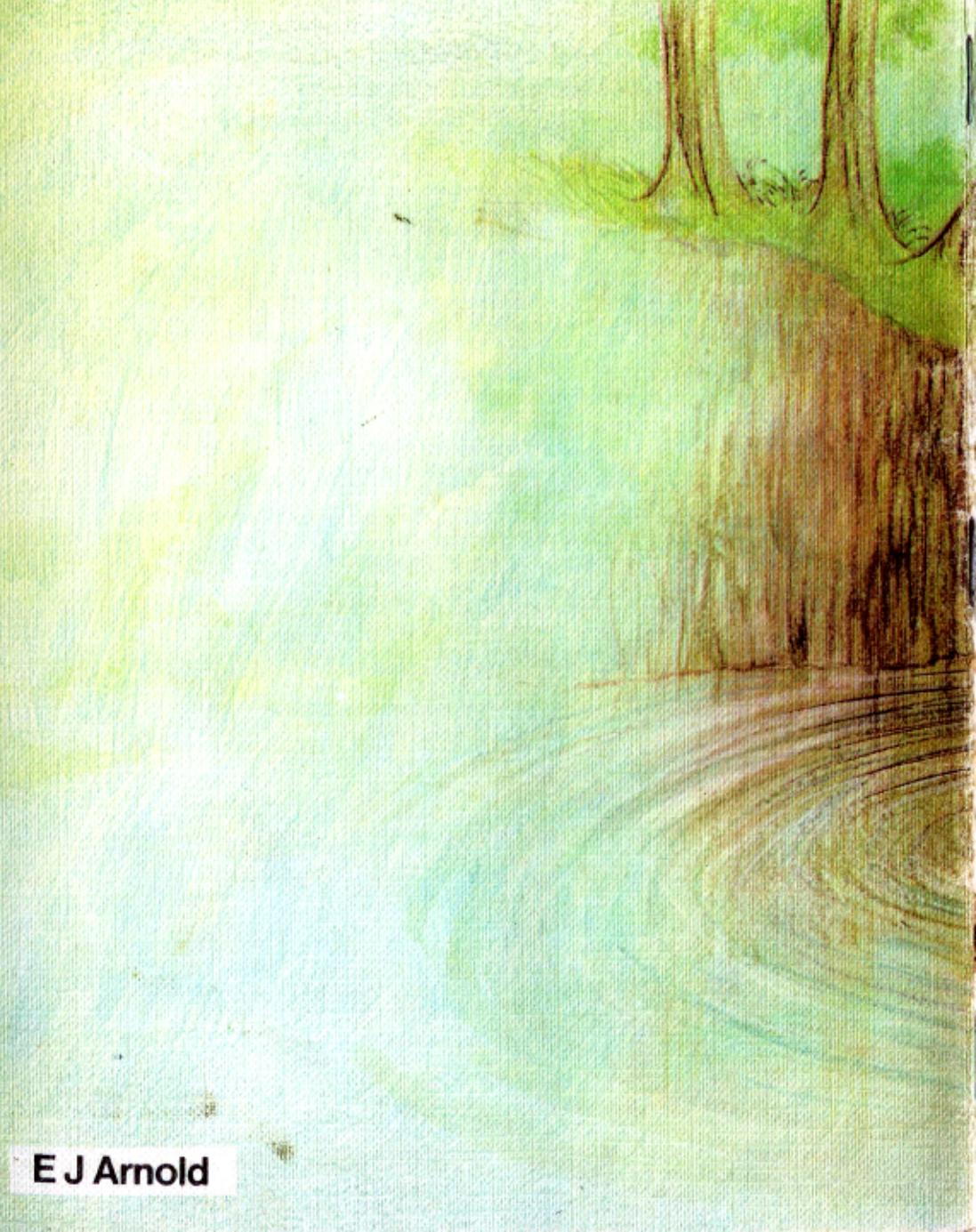
They lay down just as they were. Jeremy didn't seem to mind sleeping on the floor, and Nicola pulled her shawl around her, and settled down on the bed without a word.

"Oh well, it's only for one night," Tim said to himself, as he rolled himself in the blanket. "Two nights at the most. I just hope we don't meet Miss Miff again, before they go!"



Printed and bound in Great Britain by A. Wheaton & Co., Ltd., Exeter

Flightpath to Readiness



E J Arnold